

THE YUKON TRAIL

An Alaskan Love Story

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ON THE WAY TO KAMATLAH, ELLIOT WANDERS FROM THE TRAIL AND FEARS HE CANNOT ESCAPE DEATH

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Macdonald is attacked by mine laborers whom he had discharged, and the active intervention of Elliot probably saves his life. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly, though the latter does not know that Elliot is on a mission which threatens to spoil plans of Macdonald to acquire millions of dollars through the unlawful exploitation of immensely valuable coal fields. Elliot also "gets a line" on the position occupied by Wally Selfridge, Macdonald's right-hand man, who is returning from a visit to "the States," where he had gone in an effort to convince the authorities that there was nothing wrong in Macdonald's methods. Elliot secures an introduction to Miss O'Neill and while the boat is taking on freight the pair set out to climb a locally famous mountain. They venture too high and reach a position from which it is impossible for Miss O'Neill to go forward or turn back. Elliot leaves Sheba and at imminent peril of his life goes for assistance. He meets Macdonald, who had become alarmed for their safety, and they return and rescue Sheba. Landing at Kusiak, Elliot finds that old friends of his, Mr. and Mrs. Paget, are the people whom Sheba has come to visit. Mrs. Paget is Sheba's cousin. At dinner Elliot reveals to Macdonald the object of his coming to Alaska. The two men, naturally antagonistic, now also become rivals for the hand of Sheba. Macdonald, foreseeing failure of his financial plans if Elliot learns the facts, sends Selfridge to Kamatlah to arrange matters so that Elliot will be deceived as to the true situation.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

The latter lady, Paris-shod and gloved, shook hands smilingly with the Scotch-Canadian. "Of course we're intruders in business hours, though you'll tell us we're not," she suggested. "I've just been reading the Transcontinental Magazine. A writer there says that you are a highway robber and a gambler. I know you're a robber because all the magazines say so. But are you only a big gambler?"

He met her railery without the least embarrassment.

"Sure I gamble. Every time I take a chance I'm gambling. So does everybody else. We've got to take chances to live."

"How true, and I never thought of it," beamed Mrs. Selfridge. "What a philosopher you are, Mr. Macdonald."

The Scotsman went on without paying any attention to her effervescence. "I've gambled ever since I was a kid. I bet I could cross Death valley and get out alive. That time I won. I bet it would rain down in Arizona before my cattle died. I lost. Another time I took a contract to run a tunnel. In my bid I bet I wouldn't run into rock. My bank went broke that trip. When I joined the Klondike rush I was backing my luck to stand up. Same thing when I located the Kamatlah field. The coal might be a poor quality. Maybe I couldn't interest big capital in the proposition. Perhaps the government would turn me down when I came to prove up. I was betting my last dollar against big odds. When I quit gambling it will be because I've quit living."

"And I suppose I'm a gambler, too?" Mrs. Mallory demanded with a little tilt of her handsome head.

"Of all the women I know you are the best gambler. It's born in you."

Mrs. Mallory did not often indulge in the luxury of a blush, but she changed color now. This big, blunt man some-

times had an uncanny divination. "Did he," she asked herself, "know what stake she was gambling for at Kusiak?"

"You are too wise," she laughed with a touch of embarrassment very becoming. "But I suppose you are right. I like excitement."

"We all do. The only man who doesn't gamble is the convict in stripes, and the only reason he doesn't is that his chips are all gone. It's true that men on the frontier play for bigger stakes. They back their bets with all they have got and put their lives on top for good measure. But kids in the cradle all over the United States are



"Feefty-mile Swamp Eats a Monster That Swallows Men Alive."

going to live easier because of the gamblers at the dropping-off place."

She moved with slow grace toward the door, then over her shoulder flashed a sudden invitation at him. "Mrs. Selfridge and I are doing a little betting today, Big Chief Gambler. We're backing our luck that you two men will eat lunch with us at the Blue Bird Inn. Do we win?"

Macdonald, reached for his hat promptly. "You win."

CHAPTER VII.

The End of the Passage.

Wally Selfridge was a reliable business subordinate, even though he had slipped up in the matter of the appointment of Elliot. But when it came to facing the physical hardships of the North he was a malingering. The Kamatlah trip had to be taken because his chief had ordered it, but the little man shirked the journey in his heart just as he knew his soft muscles would shrink from the aches of the trail.

The part of the journey to be made by water was not so bad. Left to his own judgment, he would have gone to St. Michael's by boat and chartered a small steamer for the long trip along the coast through Bering sea. But this would take time, and Macdonald did not mean to let him waste a day. He was to leave the river boat at the big bend and pack across country to Kamatlah. It would be a rough, heavy trail. The mosquitoes would be a continual torment. The cooking would be poor. And at the end of the long trek there awaited him monotonous months in a wretched coal camp far from all the comforts of civilization. No wonder he grumbled.

But though he grumbled at home and at the club and on the street about his coming exile, Selfridge made no complaints to Macdonald. That man of steel had no sympathy with the yearnings for the fleshpots. He was used to driving himself through discomfort to his end, and he expected as much of his deputies. Wherefore Wally took the boat at the time scheduled and waved a dismal farewell to wife and friends assembled upon the wharf.

Elliot said good-by to the Pagets and Miss O'Neill ten days later. Diane was very frank with him.

"I hear you've been sleuthing around, Gordon, for facts about Colby Macdonald. I don't know what you have heard about him, but I hope you've got the sense to see how big a man he is and how much this country here owes him."

Gordon nodded agreement. "Yes, he's a big man."

"And he's good," added Sheba eagerly. "He never talks of it, but one finds out splendid things he has done."

The young man smiled, but not at all superciliously. He liked the stanch faith of the girl in her friend, even though his investigations had not led him to accept goodness as the outstanding quality of the Scotsman.

"I don't know what we would do without him," Diane went on. "Give him ten years and a free hand and Alaska will be fit for white people to live in. These attacks on him by newspapers and magazines are an outrage."

"It's plain that you are a partisan," charged Gordon gayly.

"I'm against locking up Alaska and throwing away the key, if that is what you mean by a partisan. We need this country opened up—the farms settled, the mines worked, the coal fields developed, railroads built."

"The Kusiak chamber of commerce ought to send you out as a lecturer to change public opinion, Diane. You are one enthusiastic little booster for freedom of opportunity," laughed the young man.

"Oh, well!" Diane joined in his laughter. "It was one of her good points that she could laugh at herself."

"I dare say I do sound like a real es-

tate pamphlet, but it's all true anyhow."

Gordon left Kusiak as reluctantly as Wally Selfridge had done, though his reasons for not wanting to go were quite different. They centered about a dusky-eyed young woman whom he had seen for the first time a fortnight before. He would have denied even to himself that he was in love, but whenever he was alone his thoughts reverted to Sheba O'Neill.

At the big bend Gordon left the river boat for his cross-country trek. Near the roadhouse was an Indian village where he had expected to get a guide for the journey to Kamatlah. But the fishing season had begun, and the men had all gone down river to take part in it.

The old Frenchman who kept the trading-post and roadhouse advised Gordon not to attempt the tramp alone.

"The trail it sees what you call dangerous. Feefty-mile Swamp eats a monster that swallows men alive, monsieur. You wait one week—two week—tree week, and some one will turn up to take you through," he urged.

"But I can't wait. And I have an official map of the trail. Why can't I follow it without a guide?" Elliot wanted to know impatiently.

The post-trader shrugged. "Maybeso, monsieur—maybe not. Feefty-mile—it eats one devil of a trail. No checha-koes are safe in there without a guide. I, Baptiste, know."

"Selfridge and his party went through a week ago. I can follow the tracks they left."

"But if it rains, monsieur, the tracks will vaneesh, n'est ce pas? Lose the way, and the little singing folk will swarm in clouds about monster while he stumbles through the swamp!"

Elliot hesitated for the better part of a day, then came to an impulsive decision. He had a reliable map, and anyhow he had only to follow the tracks left by the Selfridge party. He turned his back upon the big river and plunged into the wilderness.

There came a night when he looked up into the stars of the deep, still sky and knew that he was hundreds of miles from any other human being. Never in all his life had he been so much alone. He was not afraid, but there was something awesome in a world so empty of his kind.

The tracks of the Selfridge party grew fainter after a night of rain. More rain fell, and they were obliterated altogether.

Gordon fished. He killed fresh game for his needs. Often he came on the tracks of moose and caribou. Sometimes, startled, they leaped into view quite close enough for a shot, but he used his rifle only to meet his wants.

The way led through valley and morass, across hills and mountains. It wandered in a sort of haphazard fashion through a sun-bathed universe washed clean of sordidness and meanness.

It was the seventh night out that Elliot suspected he was off the trail. Rain sluiced down in torrents and next day continued to pour from a dun sky. His own tracks were blotted out and he searched for the trail in vain. Before he knew it he was entangled in Fifty-Mile. His map showed him the morass stretched for fifty miles to the south, but he knew that it had been charted hurriedly by a surveying party which had made no extensive explorations. A good deal of this country was terra incognita. It ran vaguely into a No Man's Land unknown to the prospector.

The going was heavy. Gordon had to pick his way through the mossy swamp, leading the pack-horse by the bridle. Sometimes he was ankle-deep in water of a greenish slime. Again he had to drag the animal from the bog to a hummock of grass which gave a spongy footing. This would end in another quagmire of peat through which they must plow with the mud sucking at their feet. It was hard, wearing toil. There was nothing to do but keep moving. The young man staggered forward till dusk. Utterly exhausted, he camped for the night on a hillock of moss that rose like an island in the swamp.

Elliot traveled next day by the compass. He had food for three days more, but he knew that no living man had the strength to travel for so long in such a morass. It was near mid-day when he lost his horse. The animal had bogged down several times and Gordon had wasted much time and spent a good deal of needed energy in dragging it to firmer footing. This time the pony refused to answer the whip. Its master unloaded pack and saddle. He tried coaxing; he tried the whip.

"Come, Old-Timer. One plunge, and you'll make it yet," he urged.

The pack-horse turned upon him dumb eyes of reproach, struggled to free its limbs from the mud, and sank down helplessly. It had traversed its last yard on the lost Alaska trails.

After the sound of the shot had died away, Gordon struggled with the pack to the nearest hummock. He cut holes in a gunny-sack to fit his shoulders and packed into it his blankets, a saucupan, the beans, the coffee, and the diminished handful of food. Into it went, too, the three slices of bacon that were left.

He hoisted the pack to his back and slipped his arms through the slits he had made. Painfully he labored forward over the quivering peat. Sometimes he stumbled and went down into the oozing mud, minded to stay there and be done with the struggle. But the urge of life drove him to his feet again. It carried him for weary miles after he despaired of ever covering another hundred yards.

With old, half-forgotten signals from the football field he spurred his will. Perhaps his mind was already beginning to wander, though through it all he held steadily to the direction that alone could save him.

When at last he went down to stay it was in an exhaustion so complete that not even his indomitable will could lash him to his feet again. For an hour he lay in a stupor, never stirring even to fight the swarm of mosquitoes that buzzed about him.

Toward evening he sat up and undid the pack from his back. The matches, in a tin box wrapped carefully with oilskin, were still perfectly dry. Soon he had a fire going and coffee boiling in the frying-pan. From the tin cup he carried strung on his belt he drank the coffee. It went through him like strong liquor. He warmed some beans and fried himself a slice of bacon, sopping up the grease with a cold biscuit left over from the day before.

Again he slept for a few hours. He had wound his watch mechanically and it showed him four o'clock when he took up the trail once more. In Seattle and San Francisco people were still asleep and darkness was heavy over

the land. Here it had been day for a long time, ever since the summer sun, hidden for a while behind the low, distant hills, had come blazing forth again in a saddle between two peaks.

Gordon had reduced his pack by discarding a blanket, the frying-pan, and all the clothing he was not wearing. His rifle lay behind him in the swamp. He had cut to a minimum of safety what he was carrying, according to his judgment. But before long his last blanket was flung aside. He could not afford to carry an extra pound, for he knew he was running a race, the stakes of which were life and death.

Afternoon found him still staggering forward. The swamps were now behind him. He had won through at last by the narrowest margin possible. The ground was rising sharply toward the mountains. Across the range somewhere lay Kamatlah. But he was all in. With his food almost gone, a water supply uncertain, reserve strength exhausted, the chances of getting over the divide to safety were practically none.

He had come, so far as he could see, to the end of the passage.

CHAPTER VIII.

Gid Holt Goes Prospecting.

As soon as Selfridge reached Kamatlah he began arranging the stage against the arrival of the government agent. His preparations were elaborate and thorough. A young engineer named Howland had been in charge of the development work, but Wally rearranged his forces so as to let each dummy entryman handle the claim entered in his name. One or two men about whom he was doubtful he discharged and hurried out of the camp.

The company boarding house became a restaurant, above which was suspended a newly painted sign with the legend, "San Francisco Grill, J. Glynn, Proprietor." The store also passed temporarily into the hands of its manager. Miners moved from the barracks that had been built by Macdonald into hastily constructed cabins on the individual claims. Wally had always fancied himself as a stage manager for amateur theatricals. Now he justified his faith by transforming Kamatlah outwardly from a company camp to a mushroom one settled by wandering prospectors.

Gideon Holt alone was outside of all these activities and watched them with suspicion. He was an old-timer, sly but fearless, who hated Colby Macdonald with a bitter jealousy that could not be placated and he took no pains to hide the fact. He had happened to be in the vicinity prospecting when Macdonald had rushed his entries. Partly out of mere perversity and partly by reason of native shrewdness, old Holt had slipped in and located one of the best claims in the heart of the group. Nor had he been moved by persuasion, threats, or tentative offers to buy a relinquishment. He was obsti-

cated. He knew a good thing when he had it, and he meant to sit tight.

The adherents of the company might charge that Holt was cracked in the upper story, but none of them denied he was sharp as a street arab. He guessed that all this preparation was not for nothing. Kamatlah was being dressed up to impress somebody who would shortly arrive. The first thought of Holt was that a group of big capitalists might be coming to look over their investment. But he rejected this surmise. There would be no need to try any deception upon them.

Mall from Seattle reached camp once a month. Holt sat down before his stove to read one of the newspapers he had brought from the office. It was the P-L. On the fifth page was a little story that gave him his clue.

ELLIOT TO INVESTIGATE MACDONALD COAL CLAIMS

The reopening of the controversy as to the Macdonald claims, which had been clear-listed for patent by Harold B. Winton, the Commissioner of the General Land Office, takes on another phase with the appointment of Gordon Elliot as special field agent to examine the validity of the holdings. The new field agent won a reputation by his work in unearthing the Oklahoma "Gold Brick" land frauds.

Elliot leaves Seattle in the Queen City Thursday for the North, where he will make a thorough investigation of the whole situation with a view to clearing up the matter definitely. If his report is favorable to the claimants the patents will be granted without further delay.

This was too good to keep. Holt pulled on his boots and went out to twit such of the enemy as he might meet. It chanced that the first of them was Selfridge, whom he had not seen since his arrival, though he knew the little man was in camp.

"How goes it, Holt? Fine and dandy, eh?" inquired Wally with the professional geniality he affected.

The old miner shook his head dolefully. "I done bust my leg, Mr. Selfish," he groaned. It was one of his pleasant ways to affect a difficulty of hearing and a dullness of understanding, so that he could legitimately call people by distorted versions of their names. "The old man don't amount to much nowadays."

"Nothing to that, Gid. You're younger than you ever were, judging by your looks."

"Then my looks lie to beat the devil, Mr. Selfish."

"My name is Selfridge," explained Wally, a trifle irritated.

Holt put a cupped hand to his ear anxiously. "Shellfish, did you say? Tha's right. How come I to forget? The old man's going pretty fast, Mr. Shellfish. No more memory than a jackrabbit. Say, Mr. Shellfish, what's the idea of all this here back-to-the-people movement, as the old sayin' is?"

"I don't know what you mean. And my name is Selfridge, I tell you," snapped the owner of that name.

"Course I ain't got no more sense than the law allows. I'm a buzzard haid, but me I kinder got to millin' it over and in respect to these here local improvements, as you might say, I'm doggoned if I sabs the whyfor."

"Just some business changes."

Holt showed his tobacco-stained teeth in a grin sly. "Oh, Tha's all. I didn't know but what you might be expecting a visitor."

Selfridge flashed a sharp sidelong glance at him. "What do you mean—a visitor?"

"I just got a notion mebbe you might be looking for one, Mr. Pelfrich. Like as not you ain't fixing up for this Gordon Elliot a-tall."

Wally had no come-back, unless it was one to retort in ironic admiration. "You're a wonder, Holt. Pity you don't start a detective bureau."

The old man went away cackling. If Selfridge had held any doubts before, he discarded them now. Holt would wreck the whole enterprise, were he given a chance. It would never do to let Elliot meet and talk with him. He knew too much, and he was eager to tell all he knew.

Macdonald's lieutenant got busy at once with plans to abduct Holt. "We'll send the old man off on a prospecting trip with some of the boys," explained Selfridge to Howland. "That way we'll kill two birds. He's back on his assessment work. The time limit will be up before he returns and we'll start a contest for the claim."

Howland made no comment. He was an engineer and not a politician. In his position it was impossible for him not to know that a good deal about the legal status of the Macdonald claims was irregular. But he was a firm believer in a wide-open Alaska, in the use of the territory by those who had settled it.

"Better arrange it with Big Bill, then, but don't tell me anything about it. I don't want to know the details," he told Selfridge.

Big Bill Macy accepted the job with a grin. He had never liked old Holt, anyhow. Besides, they were not going to do him any harm.

Holt was baking a match of sourdough bread that evening when there came a knock at the cabin door. At sight of Big Bill and his two companions the prospector closed the oven and straightened with alert suspicion. He was not on visiting terms with any of these men. Why had they come to see him?

"We're going prospecting up Wild Goose creek, and we want you to go along, Gid," explained Macy. "You're an old sour-dough miner, and we-all agree we'd like to have you throw in with us. What say?"

The old miner's answer was direct but not flattering. "What do I want to go on a wild-goose mush with a bunch of bums for?" he shrilled.

Bill Macy scratched his hook nose and looked reproachfully at his host. At least Holt thought he was looking at him. One could not be sure, for Bill's eyes did not exactly track.

"What's the use of snapping at me like a turtle? Durden says Wild Goose looks fine. There's gold up there—heaps of it."

"Let it stay there, then. I ain't going. That's flat." Holt turned to adjust the damper of his stove.

"Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't say that," drawled Bill insolently.

The man at the stove caught the change in tone and turned quickly. He was too late. Macy had thrown himself forward and the weight of his body flung Holt against the wall. Before the miner could recover, the other two men were upon him. They bore him to the floor and in spite of his struggles tied him hand and foot.

Big Bill rose and looked down derisively at his prisoner. "Better change your mind and go with us, Holt. We'll spend a quiet month up at the headquarters of Wild Goose. Say you'll come along."

"What are you going to do with me?" demanded Holt.

"I reckon you need a church to fall on you before you can take a hint. Didn't I mention Wild Goose creek three or four times?" jeered his captor.

Holt made no further protest. He was furious, but at present quite helpless. However it went against the grain, he might as well give in until rebellion would do some good.

Ten minutes later the party was moving silently along the trail that led to the hills. The pack horse went first, in charge of George Holway. The prisoner walked next, his hands tied behind him. Big Bill followed, and the man he had called Dud brought up the rear.

Macy had released the hands of his prisoner so that he might have a chance to fight the mosquitoes, but he kept a wary eye upon him and never let him move more than a few feet from him. The trail grew steeper as it neared the head of the canyon till at last it climbed the left wall and emerged from the gulch to an uneven mesa.

The leader of the party looked at his watch. "Past midnight. We'll camp here, George, and see if we can't get rid of the 'skeeters'."

They built smudge fires of green wood and on the lee side of these another one of dry sticks. Dud made coffee upon this and cooked bacon. While George chopped wood for the fires and boughs of small firs for bedding, Big Bill sat with a rifle across his knees just back of the prisoner.

"Gid's a shifty old cuss, and I ain't taking any chances," he explained aloud to Dud.

Holt was beginning to take the outrageous philosophically. He slept peacefully while they took turns watching him. Just now there would be no chance to escape, but in a few days they would become careless. The habit of feeling that they had him securely would grow upon them. Then, reasoned Holt, his opportunity would come. One of the guards would take a chance. It was not reasonable to suppose that in the next week or two he would not catch them napping once for a short ten seconds.

There was, of course, just the possibility that they intended to murder him, but Holt could not associate Selfridge with anything so lawless. The man was too soft of fiber to carry through such a program, and as yet there was need of nothing so drastic. No, this kidnapping expedition would not run to murder. He would be set free in a few weeks, and if he told the true story of where he had been his foes would spread the report that he was insane in his hatred of Macdonald and imagined all sorts of persecutions.

They followed Wild Goose creek all next day, getting always closer to its headwaters near the divide. On the third day they crossed to the other side of the ridge and descended into a little mountain park.

The country was so much a primeval wilderness that a big bull moose stalked almost upon their camp before discovering the presence of a strange biped. Big Bill snatched up a rifle and took a shot which sent the intruder scampering.

From somewhere in the distance came a faint sound.

"What was that?" asked George.

"Sounded like a shot. Mebbe it was an echo," returned Dud.

"Come too late for an echo," Big Bill said.

Again faintly from some far corner of the basin the sound drifted. It was like the pop of a scarcely heard firecracker.

The men looked at one another and at their prisoner.

"Think we better break camp and drift?" asked Dud.

"No. We're in a little draw here—as good a hiding place as we'd be likely to find. Drive the horses into the brush, George. We'll sit tight."

Dud had been busy stamping out the campfire while Holway was driving the horses into the brush.

"Mebbe you had better get the camp things behind them big rocks," Macy conceded.

Even as he spoke there came the crack of a revolver almost at the entrance to the draw.

One of the men swore softly. The dim eyes of the old miner fastened on the spot where in another moment his hoped-for rescuers would appear.

Holt recognized Elliot and the two overpowered the kidnappers and reach Kamatlah. Elliot learns truth about coal land deals.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

None More So.

"Is the woman I saw you talking to a fitting associate for you?"

"She couldn't be more fitting. She's my dressmaker."